

Fact Sheet

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Winter driving

Are winter tires required in Germany?

In November 2010 a new German federal law went into effect that specifically mandates the use of winter tires when conditions are icy. European winter tires have two kinds of markings: a snowflake for snow tires or M+S for tires designed to work in “matsch und schnee” -- mud and snow. All-season or all-weather tires may also have the M+S marking and are acceptable for winter driving. The laws also apply to motorbikes, trucks and buses, regardless of whether the driver is the owner or is renting the vehicle. Winter tires are required by law in several in other European nations. While there is no specific time period during which winter tires are required, many German drivers use the rule of thumb “von O bis O” – from O to O – meaning snow tires should be put on in October and remain on until Ostern (Easter).

What types of tires are best for winter driving?

Answer: Only snow tires without spikes or studs are allowed in Germany. Tires designed for snow function better than multi-purpose tires. All tires should have at least 1.6 millimeters of tread depth, but for maximum safety tires with less than 4 millimeters should be replaced. A one euro coin can be used for a quick “tread check.” When placed in the tire’s tread, you should not be able to see the golden edge of the coin. If you can, the tire needs to be replaced. Winter tires offer better protection than all-season models, and it’s best if all four tires match. The German automobile club ADAC recommends using tires that carry the “three peak mountain” seal shown here, the mark of snow tires that meet the highest standards.

Can tire chains be used in Germany?

In some areas snow chains may be required, but only as directed by road signs or police. An example of a German sign for areas requiring chains is at right. The maximum speed while driving a vehicle with chains is 50 kilometers per hour.

What are the penalties for driving without winter tires?

If you get caught driving without the correct tires on your vehicle, you can get a 40-euro ticket. If you cause an accident or create a road hazard or traffic jam as a result of not having the correct tires on your vehicle you can expect an 80-euro ticket and a point against your license. Police can assign blame to a motorist involved in a winter accident whose car does not have snow tires installed, regardless of who caused the accident. In addition, some insurance companies may deny coverage to motorists driving with summer tires on winter roads.

Drivers who are unsure about winter tire requirements can contact their local vehicle registration or safety office. A list of vehicle registration locations and other information for U.S. forces personnel who drive in Europe is available at the USAREUR Registry of Motor Vehicles website.

Sources: AE Pamphlet 190-34 (Drivers Handbook and Examination Manual for Germany)